DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 679 EA 018 075

TITLE	An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level. A Statement by NASSP's Council on Middle Level Education.
INSTITUTION	National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va.
PUB DATE	85
NOTE	26p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Publication Sales, National Association of Secondary School Principals, P.O. Box 3250, Reston, VA 22090 (Order Number 2108509; $4.00 plus $1.00 shipping and handling; quantity discounts; orders of $15.00 or less must be prepaid).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Curriculum; Educational Environment; *Educational Improvement; Educational Planning; Educational Principles; *Educational Quality; Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; Guidelines; Instructional Improvement; *Middle Schools; Program Effectiveness; *School Effectiveness; School Organization; Teacher Improvement; Values

ABSTRACT

To help young adolescents reach their potential, middle schools must provide high quality intellectual climates that foster the development of adaptive skills which students can use throughout their lives. Accordingly, practical advice is presented for 12 interrelated dimensions of schooling at the middle level that merit the highest priority attention: (1) core values, (2) culture and climate, (3) student development, (4) curriculum, (5) learning and instruction, (6) school organization, (7) technology, (8) teachers, (9) transition (from elementary to high school), (10) principals, (11) connections (to the community), and (12) client centeredness. Each of these dimensions is taken up in a separate section, and each section begins with a brief statement of what is necessary for excellence in the particular area discussed, followed by a list of suggestions for achieving these goals. (TE)

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A statement by NASSP's
Council on Middle Level Education

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An AGENDA for EXCELLENCE at the MIDDLE LEVEL

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Preface

Proposals to improve schooling too frequently offer only platitudes and abstractions or lay out in minute detail the nuts and bolts of the enterprise. Neither approach adequately serves the profession or its clients.

Occasionally a proposal is developed that expands our horizons and provides solid and practical advice about steps to take at the school site. ***An Agenda for Excellence*** is such a document. It examines with insight the outlook and connections of middle level youth and at the same time, insists on the importance of developing a curriculum that includes core values, focuses on appropriate learning skills, and integrates the emerging technologies to the advantage of students.

Schooling is serious business for the early adolescent who must cope simultaneously with a changing self and a changing world. Both need attention or neither will be sufficiently served. We must develop healthy, confident students and equip them with the intellectual skills to succeed in a fast-paced, information society.

The authors examine the 12 dimensions of schooling necessary for excellence at the middle level. A complete package is presented. All parts are essential to the integrity of the plan, from the identification of core values, to the focus on instruction, to the description of effective teachers, to the importance of transitions.

An Agenda for Excellence recommends some fundamental changes for schools. It provides at once a challenge to conventional practice and a clear opportunity for significant, even

ambitious gains. Some of these gains will cost money. Some will not. All are worth doing.

We must become serious about this business of achieving excellence. NASSP's Middle Level Council offers a workable blueprint for becoming serious. I recommend its proposals for your consideration.

Scott D. Thomson
Executive Director
NASSP

AN AGENDA FOR EXCELLENCE AT THE MIDDLE LEVEL

The commitment to excellence in education begins with an understanding of the mission of each school and a dedication to assuring that each school achieves its fullest potential. Some aspects of excellence cost money; others require only the reordering of priorities and a change in focus. Middle level schools, which have a special place in American education, have special missions that require cultivation and serious attention if they are to help young adolescents reach their potential.

The young people who leave the middle level schools of the '80s will enter careers, raise families, and seek the satisfactions that life will offer in the third millenium. We cannot even begin to know what information they will need to successfully negotiate that world.

Because we cannot teach them all they need to know, we must teach them how to learn and how to adjust their lives to the changes that will surround them. To do this, we must

provide high quality intellectual climates in our middle level schools and foster the development of adaptive skills that our students can use throughout their lives.

To these ends, this agenda addresses the elements of schooling that must receive the highest priority attention.

I. Core Values

For any institution to be successful, everyone involved in it must be committed to clearly articulated core values. These values must guide both individual behavior and institutional policies and practices. They must be widely disseminated and few in number. Core values for the middle level school must address personal responsibility, the primacy of learning and intellectual activity, and respect for the diversity found in the school and the society that nurtures it.

Specifically, schools should:

- Articulate the core values of the school, making certain that students, teachers, parents, and administrators are included in the process of stating these values.

- Disseminate the core values throughout the school's community, securing commitment to them from the community at large.

- Focus the core values on respect for diversity, commitment to the primacy of learning and intellectual activity, individual responsibility for personal behavior and the welfare of the school community, and other values appropriate to the local setting.

II. Culture and Climate

School improvement depends on a change in the culture and climate of the institution, not on the addition of certain program elements that seem to appear in effective schools. Specific attention must be given to the alteration of the culture and climate of the school so that it supports excellence and achievement rather than intellectual conformity and mediocrity.

To achieve this, schools must:

- Recognize and reward academic performance at a level commensurate with other reward systems, such as those for athletics and artistic performance.

- Provide opportunities for students to achieve and demonstrate excellence in a number of domains (i.e., the arts, athletics, academics, crafts). Make certain that every student in the school has a reasonable opportunity to excel at something.

- Focus teacher attention and evaluations on what students can do as well as what they cannot do. Avoid exclusive use of a "diagnostic-prescriptive" model that focuses all attention on student deficiencies.

- Provide opportunities for students and teachers to socialize informally, outside the classroom.

- Create a caring, supportive atmosphere that tolerates and welcomes wide ranges of student diversity.

III. Student Development

To a large degree, success in school and a realistic adjustment to adult life depend on personal attributes and behaviors, not intellectual ones. Student development efforts should focus on the practice and mastery of these attributes and behaviors.

To achieve this, schools must:

- Institute student advisement programs that assure each student regular, compassionate, and supportive counsel from a concerned adult about his or her academic progress, adjustment to school, and personal adjustment. While this does not replace professional counseling, it provides a consultation system to give students immediate assistance with their problems.

- Give students opportunities to behave responsibly and demonstrate their growing capacity for self-control and self-management in a secure setting. Activities that are planned and monitored by students and are clearly focused on the learning goals of the school help students accept responsibility, understand consequences, and learn to cooperate.

- Be sensitive to the expressed and unexpressed needs of students, whether they stem from physical, intellectual, emotional, or social conditions, and move swiftly to fill those needs without fanfare or unnecessary peer attention.

- Provide activities that allow students to explore their aptitudes, interests, and special talents and to develop an accurate and positive self-concept.

IV. Curriculum

The content of today's curriculum serves primarily to develop intellectual habits and capacities that are likely to be applicable to other times and other settings. The curriculum must balance skill development with content coverage, which may be outdated before it is used. To prepare youth for the future, the middle level school curriculum must develop intellectual skills and an understanding of humankind that will permit the student to gather information, organize it in a meaningful fashion, evaluate its veracity and utility, form reasonable conclusions about it, and plan for individual and collective action.

Thus, the middle level school's curriculum should:

- Equip students with skills for continued learning, including those associated with the collection of information (reading, listening, research); the organization, manipulation, and expression of ideas (mathematics, writing, speaking); the evaluation of information and ideas, including their competent analysis and critique; and the production of new plans and proposals for action.
- Teach students how to organize for action, both as individuals and as members of a group. This includes the development of planning, group process, management, evaluation, and self-evaluation and correction skills.
- Inform students of the universality of the human condition, giving special attention to the ways that humans satisfy their needs and seek personal fulfillment in various times, places, and conditions.
- Teach students about the differences that exist among people and their cultures, and the ways in which these

differences affect individuals' views of the world, their values, and their interpretations of the events of their lives.

- Provide students with opportunities to develop skills in and respect for artistic expression and aesthetic sensitivity through participation in artistic activities and through exposure to the artistic products of others.
- Inform students of the forces that shape human history, giving attention to the efforts humankind has made to influence those forces and to bring about change.
- Provide for the systematic study of change and its effect on people and societies.
- Initiate students to the study of foreign languages; not to achieve mastery, but to understand the ways that language and culture affect how people think and act.
- Engage students in productive thinking, systematic reasoning, and the evaluation of information.

Beyond consideration for its content, curriculum organization must be given careful attention. It must be organized to allow students to connect the materials and skills learned in one class to those presented in another. It must recognize the wide divergence in student development at this level, including biological and neurological differences and subsequent differences in thinking capacities and strategies. Finally, the curriculum must be related to clearly articulated goals shared by all teachers and administrators.

Consequently, it is necessary for schools to:

- Provide a curriculum that challenges each student at his or her level of ability, one that does not frustrate the less able learner or bore the most able learner.
- Provide a program of instruction matched to the unique developmental characteristics of young adolescents.

- Articulate the curriculum of the middle level school with that of the elementary school and the high school, making certain that skills are reinforced and previous learning is not repeated. At the same time, enrichment activities should foster the continuous development of more able students.
- Relate curriculum content to the immediate concerns of the young adolescent and assure its utility outside the classroom.
- Define curricular goals that are specific enough to give direction, but not so specific as to prohibit teachers from exercising professional judgment in the selection of content material, the nature of the presentation, or the method of assessment. The writing of numerous, trivial performance objectives should be avoided. Rather, the focus should be on major goals that are reasonable and important.
- Provide frequent homework that is carefully evaluated by the teacher. To be effective, homework should be coordinated among teachers, related to the goals of the class and the specific topic under study, and should not be given simply to provide additional drill time. Instead, it should require thought, reasonable intellectual effort, the competent demonstration of learned skills, and the acquisition of new knowledge. It should be appropriate in terms of both quantity and quality. The student should receive specific and regular feedback on homework assignments.
- Recognize that the young adolescent is interested in "virtually everything, but nothing very much," by providing adequate exploratory programs that introduce students to a variety of topics, skills, and content fields without requiring mastery. This can be accomplished through a series of short courses or elective units that give the stu-

dent some sense of control over the kind of learning he or she undertakes.

- Identify gifted and talented students in all areas of learning and provide them with special enrichment and advanced learning which, while individualized, does not separate them from their less gifted peers by placing them in homogeneous groups.

V. Learning and Instruction

Ultimately, the quality of any youngster's educational experience is determined by the nature of the instruction provided in the classroom. Good teachers can overcome bad curricula; good curricula cannot compensate for poor teaching.

The best teachers are still recognizable to most of us; they are caring, enthusiastic, optimistic, and well-versed in pedagogy and their subject areas. They set high expectations but are easily approached for help and guidance. Most important, they are patient and quick to reward good student performance.

The quality of instruction will be enhanced if teachers:

- Use a variety of instructional approaches: lectures to transmit information, simulations to explain complex systems, discussion to reinforce and clarify concepts, demonstrations and laboratories to make abstract theories more concrete, and meaningful practice to encourage the refinement of newly-developed skills.

- Organize instruction so that it conforms to the varying attention spans of young adolescent students, being sensitive to the need to vary activities within any given class session.

- Plan instruction that accommodates individual student learning styles and the different ways students think about and process information.

- Provide for maximum time on task, assuring that the tasks can engage students in an activity that benefits them intellectually. This requires that trivial activities be avoided and that instruction be geared to the ability levels of diverse groups in the classroom.

- Foster cooperative learning activities rather than individual competitive tasks. Such cooperation enhances the amount of time young adolescents remain engaged in the task and improves the quality of the intellectual activity associated with the task.

- Maintain an orderly, well-structured atmosphere for learning, where procedures are established to handle routine tasks and instructional time is not wasted.

- Use group interaction to stimulate creative problem solving and productive thinking.

- Plan for the management of learning tasks and activities, not just content coverage. This requires the development of a daily procedural plan that is shared with students and linked with daily goals.

- Provide regular feedback on student work, both written and oral. This requires the continual monitoring of independent work and the careful assessment of student contributions during whole-class instruction.

- Extend contact between teachers and students and avoid seatwork unless it is carefully supervised, continuously monitored, and varied to meet the appropriate levels of difficulty for every student in the class.

- Adapt material for use in the classroom and do not rely on the textbook as the organizer for the course of instruction.

- Capitalize on students' natural activity levels and integrate physical activity and hands-on instruction into the classroom procedures.

VI. School Organization

The organization of the school should encourage the smooth operation of the academic program, clear communication among teachers and administrators, and maximum teacher and student control over the quality of the learning environment. The organization of the school should contribute to a sense of belonging on the part of the people who work and learn there, and should mitigate against anonymity and alienation from the primary mission of the school.

To achieve academic productivity, schools should be organized:

- So that decisions are made at the lowest possible level in the organization. Curriculum and instruction decisions, classroom management decisions, and student service decisions should be made in the classroom or by teams of teachers working closely with students and other school personnel.

- So that the effects of size are minimized. Large schools (more than 800 students) should be broken into smaller units or "families." Schools should be organized around teaching teams that plan for and work with a clearly identified group of students, thereby assuring that every student is well-known by a group of teachers.

- With a class schedule that allows the greatest amount of uninterrupted learning time for teams of teachers working with groups of students. The schedule should be flexible and easily altered by teachers who need more or less time with students on any given day. Teachers should be given maximum control over how instructional time is allocated and used.
- With advisory groups of teachers and parents participating in important decisions about building goals, budget priorities, and school climate. Committees should not, however, propose detailed curricula that all teachers are expected to follow. Insofar as state law or board policy permits, school budgets should be developed at the building level, with priorities dictating the assignment of funds to specific projects.

VII. Technology

Technology is an inescapable part of life, but many schools have not developed coherent plans for its integration and use. Since schools cannot hope to make state-of-the-art technology available to everyone, training students in specific operations is not as important as educating them to use technology competently and thoughtfully in their study of specific subjects and in their approach to complex problems. The widespread availability of technology in the schools permits expanded use of the highly effective tutorial model of instruction.

To achieve this, schools must:

- Establish goals for the use of technology that direct the purchase of hardware and software. Consensus on these goals must be achieved by all school staff members if they are to guide curriculum development and instruction in all content fields.

- Integrate technology into the regular curriculum rather than teach specific courses about specific pieces of equipment. Instead of teaching a computer programming course, for example, teach all students to use word processing programs in English, nutrition assessment programs in home economics, electronic spreadsheets in mathematics and social studies, prediction and estimation programs in the sciences, and information management and analysis programs as a normal part of their study routines.

- Provide opportunities for students to explore the values, ethics, and moral and legal issues associated with technology. Copyright laws are especially important for students to understand, as are the real consequences of misused technology in banking, communications, media, and other fields.

- Encourage technology companies to consult with teachers about the development of computer software and important audiovisual materials. These materials should be directed to particular intellectual skill areas and content fields for the middle level school.

- Encourage government and private enterprise to contribute to the technological aspects of education by donating equipment, giving access to computer and cable networks, and providing the expertise to achieve maximum utilization of technology in the schools.

- Provide students with the basics of technological literacy: keyboarding, following operations instructions, and first-order troubleshooting and problem solving. They must also be educated about the intelligent use of technological goods and services.

VIII. Teachers

Middle level youngsters require special kinds of attention and teaching. Therefore, it is important that only the very best teachers—those who understand the subjects they teach and the development of early adolescents—be permitted to work with these dynamic youngsters. To work with young adolescents, teachers require special preparation and certification. This preparation must include study in human development, counseling, differentiating instruction, classroom management, and home-school cooperation.

To provide the best teachers for young adolescents:

- Teacher education should include the study of adolescent development, skills in diagnosis and evaluation, advising, consultation and problem solving, the application of technology to education, human relations, planning, classroom management, personal research and inquiry in the classroom, and, in many cases, a foreign language appropriate to the community in which the teacher will work.

- Preparation programs must be offered to teachers recruited from elementary and high schools and to those who plan to teach at the middle level after completing a bachelor's degree in another field.

  This preparation should include, at a minimum, intensive study in the core areas outlined above, strong college-level preparation in at least two subject fields, and a one-year internship under the supervision of a master teacher and a university supervisor, both of whom have been specifically trained in supervisory methods and the data-based assessment of teaching.

- Specific preservice preparation programs must be offered by colleges and universities that educate teachers. This preparation should include not only the core areas named above, but comprehensive study in at least two major content fields, written and oral composition, technology applied to teaching, the teaching of reading in the content fields, human relations, and the diversity of American culture.

  In addition, programs should require early and continuous field experience in a middle level school, beginning in the freshman year of training and continuing, with a gradual increase in instructional responsibilities, until the student-teaching experience in the senior year. In all these settings, the field experience should be supervised by a qualified, experienced master teacher who has had specific training in supervisory techniques and the collection of information about teaching behavior.

- The university's best students must be recruited to become teachers. Recruitment efforts must begin in the high school, where special "apprentice teacher" programs would enable high school students to work with a middle level teacher as a tutor and instructional assistant.

It is no longer possible to rely on those entering the profession to provide the energy and renewal for change and continued progress. Specific measures must be taken to encourage good teachers to remain in the profession and to become career teachers.

To achieve this, we must:

- Raise all teacher salaries by a minimum of 25 percent. Thereafter, teacher salaries must be kept competitive with other, similarly-prepared professional groups.

- Provide a career path that encourages excellent teachers to remain in the classroom. This requires the establishment

of ranks or career ladders whereby promotion is based on specific professional criteria judged by colleagues and administrators. Promotion to higher ranks would result in substantial salary increases and would extend specific privileges regarding instructional load assignments, non-instructional assignments, and discretionary time.

- Establish a system that rewards exceptional teaching performance and encourages professional excellence. This may take the form of bonus payments for specific activities or increases to the salary base for long-term performance at an exceptional level.

- Stop assigning teachers to noninstructional duties, such as supervision and clerical assignments that can be performed by non-professional staff members. Adequate clerical and technical support must be available for each teacher in the form of secretarial services, word processing equipment, audiovisual equipment, and professional journals and materials.

- Develop specific strategies for revitalizing veteran teachers who face the prospect of being burned out by the repetitiveness of their assignments. These strategies include sabbaticals, ranging from two weeks to a year; re-training grants that permit university study during the summer; assignment to teach in two content fields; and teacher-exchange programs with neighboring districts. As part of the continuing professional development of all staff members, funds must be available for teacher travel to professional conferences, for continuing education, and for awards and grants for independent study designed to upgrade teaching skills.

- Provide for continuing teacher education and staff development that is clearly linked to building goals, teacher needs, and local conditions. These programs should be tailored to meet the specific needs of individual teachers.

- Limit teaching loads to the equivalent of four academic classes each day and a student load of 80-100. Provide additional time for planning and curriculum development, tutorials and individual conferences with students, colleagues, parents, etc., and dealing with the increasing demands for excellence and change being placed on the schools.

Teachers must also model intellectual growth and the excitement of learning. To that end:

- Teachers should pursue studies related to their subjects, the way youngsters learn these subjects, and effective instruction. Personal research and inquiry should be directed toward fundamental questions about teaching: what to do, when to do it, why to do it, and when to stop doing it.

- Corporations, community agencies, and the government should provide research and development grants that can be used to investigate a specific topic or initiate a low-cost project that can be continued without additional resources.

- Teachers should plan their own continuing education, either through a professional development committee in each district or through the development of individually-designed and negotiated proposals. Insofar as possible, continuing education should be conducted by local professionals; external consultants should be used only when local talent is not available.

IX. Transition

One of the main responsibilities of the middle level school is to assure the smooth transition for students from elementary school to high school. Most school systems maintain three distinct, autonomous, and separate units that do little to coordinate their activities, programs, or curricula. The coordination that exists usually results from informal agreements and conversations between and among principals; it rarely stems from planned efforts to integrate the schools' programs across all grade levels.

To assure that the transition function is fulfilled:

- Schools should create a transition panel, composed of elementary, secondary, and middle level school teachers and parents. Panel members should discuss practices that interfere with smooth transition from one level to another, identify ways to facilitate this transition, and recommend to the schools or the board of education methods for fully integrating and articulating the K-12 programs in the district.

X. Principals

The preponderance of research concludes that the principal is the pivotal figure in effective schools. Without a strong instructional leader, there is little consensus on building goals, standards of conduct, or professional standards. The result is a lack of unity in purpose and a less effective school. Successful schools, on the other hand, enjoy strong administrative leadership, a clear sense of mission, and confidence in the capacity of

administrators to handle problems that interfere with the learning program of the school.

In order to have strong leaders, we must:

- Have strong preparation programs that follow, as a minimum, the preparation program for teachers.
- Provide appropriate internships for beginning principals, perhaps using a senior colleague as a mentor. This assures that the principal always has access to a peer-colleague for discussions about school problems or planned directions.
- Give building administrators control over their own budgets, staffing, and physical plant. While these operations must occur within district guidelines and state law, advisory groups of parents and teachers should assist the principal in making the important decisions in these areas.
- Provide principals with a colleague group and give them the opportunity to reflect on their work and to secure assistance with specific problems. To this end, a national network of principal academies should be formed to enable principals to stay in touch with the latest developments in all relevant fields.
- Provide adequate assistance in the management of the school, including an assistant principal for each group of 300 students in the building.

XI. Connections

The success of any school is determined by the extent to which it is supported and valued in the community and by the parents of the youth who attend. Fewer households today have

children in school; thus, the public no longer has the "child's eye view" of the school that was common for so long. This means that the school has to work harder to maintain good relations with its constituent community.

To achieve this, we recommend:

- An active public relations effort on the part of the school. This includes information sharing with the entire community, regular press releases for the local media, an open and receptive attitude toward school visitors, and specific instruction for students on their role in improving relations with the community.
- The use of community resources, including people and places, in the instructional program. Community members can provide tutorial help and clerical assistance, and can serve as resources in classrooms on specific topics.
- Attention to the changing nature of the American family and adjustment of school practices to suit this new institution. With numerous middle level school students coming from single-parent families or from homes with two working parents, the conventional notions about how families conduct their affairs and relate to the school may no longer be valid. School communications, meeting times, conference dates, and requests for volunteers should respect this new family structure and accommodate its needs.
- Helping newswriters do a more professional job reporting about schools by showing them how complex a school environment can be. Invite them to the school often enough so that they feel comfortable there and are able to detect its subtleties and nuances. Schools of journalism and education should cooperate in preparing future journalists to report on the most complex and pervasive of American institutions.

XII. Client Centeredness

The most successful schools are those that understand the unique needs of their clients and fill those needs quickly and effectively. Most important, effective schools understand the relationship of development to learning so that students are not asked to violate the dictates of their development in order to participate fully in the educational program.

To achieve client-centered schools, we must:

- Be certain that everyone who works in middle level schools understands how youngsters of this age develop and how that development affects their behavior and learning. All staff members, including non-certified personnel, should receive at least minimal training in early adolescent development.
- Adapt schools to the developmental needs of the students in them. This includes not only physical adaptations that accommodate the wide ranges of growth, but also programmatic adaptations that allow for every student to achieve a measure of success in all school programs.